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ABSTRACT

Foreign graduate students who have reached an advanced level in a specific discipline may be able to explain that subject's intricacies with ease but may have difficulty in speaking comprehensibly, explaining clearly, and understanding students easily while leading an undergraduate discussion section. Harvard University offers a program to help foreign teaching assistants become more competent and confident in the American classroom. Program participants discuss their own teaching experience, assumptions about good teaching, and the value of communicating with students and using a more interactive style of teaching. Through viewing and discussing selected examples of videotaped classes, foreign teaching assistants can observe and discuss with professionals a wide variety of teaching styles that are well received by American students. The foreign students come to sense the expectations teachers and students have of each other, which eases communication and contributes to their overall teaching effectiveness. The teaching assistants also view videotapes of their own teaching and discussion leading, and are able to review the structure, content, and delivery of their presentations and gain support from their peers. (MSE)

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TRAINING FOREIGN TEACHING ASSISTANTS: USING VIDEOTAPE TO OBSERVE AND PRACTICE COMMUNICATING AND INTERACTING WITH STUDENTS

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Graduate teaching assistants are often assigned to teach small sections in which undergraduates are expected to participate and discuss the subject matter of a course. Foreign graduate students who have reached an advanced level in a specific discipline may be able to explain its intricacies with ease, particularly to others in the same field. However, when their teaching assignment calls for leading a discussion section, especially with students new to the subject, foreign teaching assistants may encounter difficulty in speaking comprehensibly, in explaining clearly, and in understanding their students easily. In their own academic careers they may not have been taught in a way that allowed for student participation; they may lack familiarity with the rules of English conversation that govern discussions; and they may use non-verbal behavior that does not invite or support this kind of communication. They may encounter an additional barrier to communication with some American students who believe they cannot understand their foreign teaching assistants. For all these reasons foreign teaching assistants can benefit from developing skills to communicate with their students. Crucial to their teaching success with American students (according to the research of Bailey 1983) is an ability to promote interaction in the classroom.

In order to help foreign teaching assistants become more competent and confident teachers in the American classroom, Harvard University offers a program called "Teaching in English," organized by the Harvard-Danforth Center for Teaching and Learning and the Office of English for Foreign Students. (For an analysis of different forms of institutional response to the foreign teaching assistant problem see Fisher: Forthcoming). In this program, participants first discuss their own previous teaching experience, their assumptions about good teaching, and the

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value of communicating with students and using a more interactive style of teaching. Many teaching assistants view interacting with students as one of the biggest problems they face in their teaching. One teaching assistant said he taught his class by clinging to the blackboard and racing through problems because he was afraid the students might ask him a question. Another teaching assistant reported that in his social science seminar he simply resorted to lecturing after his few attempts at discussion-leading had failed.

While a short course cannot perform miracles, it can provide ways to promote interaction in class and communication with students. Videotaped classes provide models of teacher-student interactions that are observed and discussed by program participants. Participants then videotape their own teaching and discussion-leading sessions in order to practice new skills, identify their own strengths and weaknesses, and observe subsequent improvement.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Observation of Teaching Skills

Through viewing and discussing selected examples of videotaped classes, foreign teaching assistants can observe a wide variety of teaching styles that are well-received by American students. The program emphasizes that teachers in math or science may seek student participation for reasons that are different from those of a social science or humanities teacher: that different teaching strategies may be used effectively during a single class meeting or across the semester; and, most especially, that individual teachers develop unique teaching styles reflecting their own personalities, values, and enthusiasm. As a focus for observing several five to ten-minute videotapes of classes in math, social science, and humanities courses, particpants were asked the following questions:

What does the teacher do to encourage student participation?
Why might the teacher want to encourage student participation?

Looking at sequences of classroom interactions, stopping the videotape, and specifying teacher behavior gives a concrete focus for discussions about teaching. In a calculus class, for example, the teacher is seen asking students how much they remember about checking equations to see if they are exact; as she writes out the equations, she invites the students to collaborate in working it out step by step. Another teacher, in a discussion of the Soviet economy, calls on students who speak infrequently whenever they show a willingness to talk; responds to student contributions differently in order to encourage more retiring students and to challenge more assertive ones; and makes frequent summaries, elaborating on students' points and attributing them to individuals by name. In a third class, a literature teacher initiates an animated discussion of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by hearing from nearly every student in response to his opening question: "Do you retain any vivid images from this poem?" The question is readily answered by many students who provide concrete examples; the teacher moves the discussion forward by listening closely and respectfully to student comments, relating students' comments to one another. Students are encouraged to explore new ideas by the teacher's willingness to pursue unanticipated directions introduced by the students.

As the videotapes are shown, the foreign teaching assistants' comments about the rationale for encouraging student participation and discussion are supplemented by what we (the teaching consultants) know about the videotaped teachers' reasons for asking the particular questions and responding to different students as they do. These elaborations both inform participants about how successful teachers think about their teaching and add to their understanding of teaching in an American context. Math and science teachers, for example, know that it is easy to talk over students' heads, and that it can be difficult for students to articulate what they do not understand. By asking for specific answers, in a non-threatening way, the teachers keep better track of how students are grasping the material; by anticipating being asked, students are apt to follow the class more closely. Teachers of discussion sections that follow lectures, such as the government class and the poetry class, view class meetings as an opportunity for students to demonstrate their command of the lecture material and to explore the associated readings. The government teacher, at the beginning of the year, establishes a clear expectation that students will talk without his having to call on them. Understanding that it is their class, not his, they come to class prepared to make contributions. The literature teacher views each class as an opportunity for students to develop their own ideas by talking with each other. He knows that there are many different ways to read a text, and that individuals have different personal responses. By creating a safe atmosphere for students to express themselves, individuals are encouraged to develop and support their own interpretations.

Non-verbal aspects of teacher (and student) behavior which may be particular to American culture are evident on the videotapes. It is not possible (and possibly not desirable) to identify and copy the details of another culture nor to expect to become totally accepting American student behavior. But it is possible to discuss the meaning that particular behavior conveys and its implications in the American cultural context, gradually developing a framework for observation and understanding. Aspects of behavior that affect teacher-student classroom interactions, apart from the actual words that are used in class include: how teachers and students enter and leave the room, how they interact before the formal opening of class, how and where people stand or sit, the level of formality between students and teacher, use of humor, tone of voice, facial expressions, and patterns of eye behavior.

As foreign teachers view several classes, they sense the expectations that teachers and students have of each other. Familiarity with these expectations can ease communication between students and teacher which is important not only for improving classroom interactions, but also for contributing to the overall effectiveness of the foreign teaching assistants. In the videotapes, successful teachers demonstrate some of the following qualities: encouraging students in their learning, for example; taking into account different levels of academic preparation, showing politeness, and even gentleness in correcting student errors; accessibility, for example, conversing before or after class, and holding office hours during the term; and showing that students are known as individuals, for example, making references to their particular interests and using names in class. A range of behaviors can be discussed to help establish the boundaries of what is expected and what is acceptable. To what extent are teaching assistants expected to be friends with students? What limits can they set on their accessibility? What constitutes unacceptable student behavior? What does it mean to be in an authority role?

Discussing teachers' expectations of students with specific references to teacher-student relationships in different cultures and the participants' own experiences can be very illuminating to foreign teaching assistants, and to the teaching consultants as well. For example, the level of preparation of many American high school math students is surprisingly inadequate, according to teaching assistants from different educational systems. That a teacher can successfully organize a class around the expectation that students will do the reading throughout the semester, as opposed to waiting for a year-end exam, is a surprise to people from some educational systems; that weekly quizzes are not the custom in all American universities is a surprise to others. Several foreign teaching assistants notice that American teachers emphasize the development of students' opinions, in papers as well as in class: in their own learning they may have had more experience in citing authorities than in asserting and supporting their own views.

Videotaped Practiced Teaching

In addition to using videotape to present models of American classroom interactions, videotape is used for foreign teaching assistants to observe themselves as they practice their teaching skills. The sequence of teaching skills in the practice sessions is incremental, from the least to the most interactive. The first activity is taping (and then viewing) a short presentation of a concept or a process in the teaching assistant's own field, accompanied by a handout or other visual support for communication. The second activity is a re-taping of the presentation, in which participants take into account what they have learned about giving clear presentations, as well as explicitly interacting with the audience. The third activity is a videotaped discussion in which each participant has an opportunity to practice discussion-leading skills. After everyone has given a presentation, the tapes are played back to the group one by one. While viewing the tapes no feedback is given by the teaching consultants or by peers until the individual has had a chance to express personal reactions to being videotaped and to the videotape itself.

The prospect of being videotaped is, for many people, terrifying. The prospect of seeing oneself is often even more terrifying. Seeing several videotaped classes before being taped oneself can help videotaping seem like a more natural activity; yet, seeing oneself on tape can still be significant event accompanied by anxiety and embarassment, On the other hand, seeing oneself—how one looks, how one explains, and how one listens—can be very compelling. To temper what may be for some an overwhelmingly self-critical reaction, it is important to view tapes with others sensitive to the fear accompanying videotaping and the power of seeing one's own image.

Being allowed to react to oneself on a level that is very personal and non-academic can clear the way for observing teaching skills. Many people first notice their accents, expressing surprise that they sound the way they do. Then the length of their hair, their posture, or their mannerisms take on disproportionate significance. The teaching consultant can acknowledge the power of that visual image, and then move the focus to teaching. Being one's own critic uses the full power of videotape. This is a medium unlike others because it allows people to watch themselves perform and to criticize themselves without relying on another's observations.

Because the videotape faithfully records an entire teaching sequence, omitting none of the lapses, it is very tempting for observers to take advantage of this record and overload the presenter with advice. However, since the presenters themselves have the first say, they can set the terms for evaluating their own performance by specifying what they did well and on what they would like to work. What participants see for themselves is worth far more than what others point out to them, at least in their initial experiences with videotaping. The essence of using videotape is for participants to be their own observers and critics when the tapes are played back, to formulate their own goals to work on, and to check on their own improvements.

Reviewing the First Practice Presentations

Some questions that guide participants as they begin reviewing their teaching include: How do you motivate the listeners so that they will attend to your presentation? How do you vary the pace of your delivery? What are your key points? How do you provide emphasis? About what do you want to convey enthusiasm? How do you want to present yourself?

In response to these questions people may comment about the structure and content of their presentations, how the use of the blackboard or a handout affected their delivery, and how eye behavior, body position, and voice affected communication. Fellow participants, who subsequently join in the discussion, are urged to point out strengths. They are further cautioned that people will be more likely to work on improving what they feel is important, and that they can concentrate on only a few things at a time.

The Second Practice Presentation

Re-taping presentations, and viewing subsequent improved versions, builds confidence as individuals see their own improvement in aspects of teaching that they view as important. Ultimately, as the teaching assistants feel and look confident and competent as teachers, their students' understanding and willingness to communicate with them will increase. For the second videotaped presentation, the explicit assignment is for the teaching assistants to draw in the audience by asking about their experience with the topic or engaging them in a demonstration or solution to a problem. The goal is to incorporate into a presentation as much contact and communication with an audience as possible so that teaching this way becomes more natural.

By the time individuals repeat their presentations they have had more instruction in techniques of teaching and more discussion of the barriers to student comprehension of foreign teaching assistants. They have practiced framing presentations, using the devices to organize speech that contributes to clear explanations (Brown 1978), such as announcing the elements of their talk, and providing explicit transitions to examples, comparisons, or new topics. In our experience, many foreign teaching assistants worry particularly about their pronunciation. While pronunciation is what undergraduates complain about most (Hinofotis and Bailey 1980), there is evidence that other phenomena might be confused with pronunciation (Zukowski/Faust 1984). In the course of the training program, teaching assistants are alerted to techniques used by native English speakers when they

teach, techniques that they indeed might use were they teaching in their own languages. The foreign teaching assistants express themselves very parsimoniously, while native speakers of English might use more redundancy, restating ideas in slightly different ways in successive sentences instead of trusting in one simple sentence to do the job. Foreign teaching assistants, as well as many inexperienced teachers, also tend to express themselves casually in the code of their disciplines. By the time of the second, more interactive, videotaped presentation, they have had a chance to practice paraphrasing into ordinary English the symbols, formulas, or abbreviated statements over which they may have earlier glossed.

Videotaped Discussion-leading

Having the opportunity to actually lead a brief discussion and then view themselves is the culminating activity of this sequence. We have experimented with different ways to organize discussions in order to give all the foreign teaching assistants a chance to lead, to allow the discussion to flow, and to keep within reasonable time boundaries (stopping the tape and discussing observations takes considerably longer than the actual taping). One format that works well is for individuals to choose a topic related to one of the two themes of the program, subjects in which everyone has done some reading in the course and has something to offer: teaching and culture.

All the participants are responsible for leading ten minutes of the discussion; they must turn their topics into questions that provoke a response from participants and sustain the discussion. Furthermore, they have an opportunity to use many other skills, such as interrupting another speaker tactfully, changing the subject smoothly, buying time when they are put on the spot, handling silence, reformulating others' statements to test comprehension, re-phrasing a question that gets no response, asking for clarification, asking for examples, balancing different participants' roles in the discussion by drawing out retiring people, and gracefully cutting off long statements. In reviewing the videotape of the discussion, participants consider the responsibilities of a discussion-leader and the mechanics of discussion-leading. They observe how different types of questions facilitate discussion and how successfully they, as leaders and participants in the discussion, integrate the many skills they have been practicing throughout the program.

In summary, the use of videotape in preparing foreign teaching assistants to teach in the United States allows them to observe a wide variety of classroom situations that they might encounter in their own teaching, to observe a number of teaching styles and strategies, to practice teaching their own subject matter, and to gain experience and develop confidence by observing their interactions with others in a classroom setting.

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